Distributed Digital Libraries
'NOF-Digi': Putting UK Culture Online

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Abstract

This article describes a major digitisation programme aimed at improving online access to UK cultural resources from Britain's museums, libraries and galleries for lifelong learners and others. The programme is supported by lottery funding of £50m and provides free access to important areas of the country's diverse cultural, artistic, and community resources. The article describes the programme, highlights some of the projects, and looks at areas where improvements to programme coordination might have been made. At time of writing, most of the projects are still in progress.

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NOF, NOF-Digi, the National Grid for Learning, and the People's Network

The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) (see http://www.nof.org.uk/) awards grants to education, health and environment projects in the UK, distributing Lottery funds to support a range of worthwhile initiatives. One of its programmes, NOF-Digitise - launched in August 1999 and popularly known as 'NOF-Digi' - aims to create innovative online resources of benefit to every UK citizen, bringing together over 500 partner organisations to create support for lifelong learning under the broad themes of citizenship, re-skilling, and cultural enrichment. A budget of £50m supports digitisation initiatives offering content from a wide variety of sources, ranging from major collections such as the Science Museum and the National Libraries, through regional 'sense of place' collections, to material in community museums and voluntary organisations. The material being digitised encompasses 'text, drawings, photos, maps, film and sound recordings and much more' and is particularly aimed at schools through the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and at public library users through the Peoples Network (People's Network, 1998). More information on these latter initiatives can be found at http://www.ngfl.gov.uk/ and http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/

The Enrich UK Portal

At time of writing, these projects are still ongoing. There is, however, already a good deal of material available, albeit mainly in embryonic form. There are a variety of access routes to the material. Obviously, it is accessible via individual project websites and even (sometimes) websites highlighting particular local collections within bigger projects. It is also available through the websites of consortia combining a range of projects, and through sites offering English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh perspectives on the material. For easy access to all of the 150-plus projects funded, however, the best approach is to use NOF's own 'EnrichUK' portal (see http://www.enrichuk.net/). Here you will find access to a range of treasures covering a wide diversity of subjects, including (to name only a few):

- The heritage, community history and culture of Staffordshire

- Trials which took place at the Old Bailey trials (London's central criminal court) between 1674 and 1834
- Scottish traditional music and dance (James Scott Skinner)
- Parliamentary Reports from the Victorian and other eras
- UK Flora and Fauna
- Royal Shakespeare Company pictures and exhibitions
- The Industrial Revolution
- The History of Glasgow
- The story of Huntley & Palmers, world famous biscuit company
- Caribbean, Irish, Jewish and South Asian migrations to England
- The Cotton Industry

Projects: A Snapshot

It is, of course, impossible here to give more than a limited glimpse into the breadth and depth of materials being made available through NOF-Digi. The few projects described briefly below are presented as representative of the many excellent initiatives under development within the programme. It is not a list of the only projects worthy of note. That having been said, they do, hopefully, help to add flavour to what might otherwise be a rather dry and dusty account:

British Pathe

British Pathe is one of the oldest and most notable media companies in the world, producing famous bi-weekly newsreels and Cinemagazines from 1902 onwards. When the British Pathe ended production of its newsreels in 1970, they had accumulated over 3,500 hours of filmed history amounting to over 90,000 individual items. These have now formed the basis of the BritishPathe.com (see http://www.britishpathe.com/) web site offering access to 3,500 hours of video footage and over 90,000 web pages. Video clips can now be downloaded and viewed free. Powerful searching and browsing tools are available, but the sheer size of the collection is such that a 'Lucky Dip' facility is offered to provide users a random selection of clips, which can then be previewed or downloaded. By late spring 2003, BritishPathe.com also hope to offer over 12 million JPEG stills.

Applause Southwest

The Applause Southwest (see http://www.applausesw.org) archive contains material pertaining to theatre and theatrical arts in the South West of Britain. The fully searchable archive allows users to view records and search the archive for digitised historical playbills or posters from 1780 until the present day, view historical archives and objects that have never before been seen by the public and learn of theatrical developments in Plymouth and the surrounding area since the mid 18th century. Users can also delve into digitised images, histories and 3D virtual reconstructions of theatres, many long since demolished.

I Dig Sheffield

I Dig Sheffield (http://www.idigsheffield.org.uk) provides an online guide to archaeology from the Sheffield and the Peak District. More than 400 objects excavated from over 30 digs in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire, many too fragile to be displayed at the city's museum, have been preserved, then photographed and mounted on the web site. Archaeological finds can be browsed by category, including areas such as dress and accessories, food and farming or conflict and war, or alternatively the collection can be searched by keyword, by time period, find material and other associated characteristics.

The Union Makes Us Strong: TUC History Online

TUC History Online (see http://www.unionhistory.info) makes accessible many of the unique collections held in the Trades Union Congress library collection. Trade unions have been instrumental in influencing economic, social and political developments in the UK. However, as is noted on the web site, 'much of their history is at present unknown and inaccessible to the public'. TUC History Online aims to correct this by providing access to a dynamic set of new resources culled from books, pamphlets, union publications, ephemera and documents pertaining to industrial relations and working

conditions held by the library. Although the majority of resources, at present, relate to the Match Workers strike in 1888 and a 150 year labour history timeline, five new learning resources will be released in phases throughout 2003 and will include collections relating to the General Strike, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists and numerous TUC reports.

Gathering the Jewels

Gathering the Jewels (see http://www.gtj.org.uk/) brings together a unique collection of Welsh cultural resources including historic letters, paintings, documents, artefacts and photographs, many of them exceptional, amassed from libraries, museums and archives all over Wales. With individual items enhanced by annotation (available in both English and Welsh) and contextualised within themed super and sub collections, Gathering the Jewels provides search and browse tools capable of tapping into a wealth of material pertaining to the natural, political, economic and social history of Wales. Whilst still in development, Gathering the Jewels predicts that the collection will contain over 20,000 images by May 2003 and will become national learning resource.

Act of Union

The Act of Union Virtual Library (see http://www.actofunion.ac.uk/) is a digital resource relating to the 1801 Act of Union between Ireland and Britain and makes accessible hundreds of digitised pamphlets, newspapers, parliamentary papers and manuscript material culled from specialist collections in various public institutions in Belfast, all searchable bibliographically, and displayed in such a way as to facilitate browsing. Since many of the pamphlets and parliamentary paper have not only been digitised but their contents text keyed to add value to inconsistent typeface quality, free text searching is also provided constituting a key resource of 'inestimable use for scholars'.

Conclusion: Problems and Issues

There are, undoubtedly, many positive things to be said about NOF-Digi additional to those already made above. In a column written for professionals active in the field under scrutiny, however, there is, perhaps, more value to be had by examining some of the areas where improvements might have been made – in the interests of ensuring that mistakes (if this is what they are, oversights might be an equally valid term) are not repeated in later or other programmes. At time of writing, with most of the projects still a long way from completion, it is too early to be comprehensive in this respect. As far as we are aware, no detailed survey has been undertaken as yet, and this does not claim to be one. Hopefully, however, it is close to being the next best thing – an informed view of concerns being expressed by professionals working in a range of NOF-Digi projects to an organsation (the CDLR) that is involved in two projects itself and is advising some others.

Speaking from this perspective, we are aware of the following points being made by participants in the programme:

- *Poor balance between expenditure on content and expenditure on metadata creation.* There is some concern that many projects underestimated the time, effort and expertise required to create the metadata needed to adequately describe digitised materials for retrieval and comprehension. This concern has been reported to NOF by at least one group of projects, but we are not aware of any action having been taken to date. The problem has at least two sources. On the one hand, there has been a failure to recognise that creating metadata for something like a digitised photograph is more difficult and time-consuming than doing so for a book or a similar electronic resource – in particular, a photograph usually has nothing even remotely like a title page for the cataloguers to base their work on. On the other, there is still a general failure to recognise the increasing importance of professional quality interoperable metadata for finding and identifying appropriate resources amongst the ever-growing volume of material available over the Internet. When will we learn that a valuable resource is only valuable if those who need it can find it and that adequate expenditure on metadata is not a drain on resources available for content but essential expenditure if the true value of content is to be realised?
- *Failure to recognise the importance of metadata content standards.* These are, of course, essential if interoperability across collections is to be ensured. Ensuring that all projects offer at least the DC core fields is of limited value if there is no agreement as to how authors or place names or

photograph captions should be constructed and encoded. NOF, to its credit, realised from the start that the ability to deliver a fully networked information environment for learning and cultural enrichment would be difficult to achieve without the use of numerous technical standards and guidelines and had an extensive technical standards document covering issues of preservation, interoperability, accessibility, metadata, collection management and security drawn up and made available (UKOLN & Resource, 2003). However, the document does not cover the issue of metadata content standards and it is certain that there will be deficiencies in interoperability across the NOF-Digi environment as a result. A related concern is the area of subject description. Not only has there been no guidance offered in this area – a significant oversight when almost every project is offering subject-based access – but even the Enrich UK site has found it easier to invent a subject scheme rather than adopt a standard scheme. Some groups within the total programme are attempting to address the issue, but again there is little likelihood of a standard subject approach across the whole environment being possible.

- *Insufficient consultation with participants.* With hindsight, it would seem sensible to have had in place mechanisms that would allow participants to interact more helpfully with those managing the programme. Each of the two problems mentioned above might have been tackled early on if such mechanisms (e.g. Regular meetings with NOF Project staff) had been in place. Both were identified and 'telegraphed' to NOF at an early stage but there appears to have been no adequate mechanism in place for identifying and tackling problems as they arose. A lack of consultation has also been blamed on other difficulties. One example here is the failure of the portal to highlight important sub-collections otherwise 'hidden' under entries for consortia (e.g. there are collections covering topics like 'Red Clydeside', 'Springburn Community Museum' and 'Witchcraft in Ayrshire, to name but a few, hidden under a single entry for the Resources for Learning in Scotland project   Another is the feeling – shared by most projects – that the promotional programmes were pushed on projects too early in their development.

None of these points should be taken as detracting from the generally positive contribution of NOF-Digi and the projects it supports to the delivery of an enriched understanding of UK cultures and sub-cultures both at home and internationally, nor to the resulting enhancement of the web presence of the cultures of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales generally. Hopefully, however, they can and will be taken as pointers to areas where all of those involved in digitisation programmes and projects should and could improve performance in future.

Reminder

As I think I've made clear, I am keen to interact with readers of this column, so please feel free to contact me. My email address is d.m.nicholson@strath.ac.uk

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